

Series: Christmas and the Cross
Title: Jesus Deserves Our Devotion
Text: Mark 14:1-11
Date: November 22, 2020

Verse 1

Mark 14:1 transitioned readers from the glory and mystery of the end times to the path to the cross that laid before Jesus. The verse said, “It was two days before the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a cunning way to arrest Jesus and kill him” (Mark 14:1). The reference to “two days before the Passover” indicates that the events in our passage took place on Tuesday.¹ We know Jesus was already in town for the Passover week. In accordance with Exodus 12:43-13:2, the Passover was a holy celebration that commemorated Israel’s release from Egyptian slavery. The holiday was marked by the sacrifice of an animal. The time was drawing near for the actual Passover meal that would take place on Thursday. It is the actual meal that is spoken of in our current verse.²

On the heels of the Passover meal, the Feast of Unleavened Bread would be celebrated as well. In accordance with Exodus 13:3-16, this second festival was designed to remind the Jews that they had been made separate from Egypt. Preparations were being made for pilgrims and locals to observe these two special observances. It is not by coincidence that Jesus was sacrificed in the midst of such festivities. He was the sacrificial lamb who gave His life to liberate His children from the bondage of sin and death.

While pilgrims and locals alike in Jerusalem were making preparations for the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread, the self-righteous religious leaders were making other plans. They were scheming concerning how they might get rid of Jesus. Earlier in our gospel account, we have seen the religious leaders previously plotted to have Jesus put to death (Mark 3:6 and 11:18). In Mark 14:1 they ramped up their attempts. Whereas previous attempts had proved futile, they began to use more sinister tactics. This is seen through the word translated “cunning” in our text. The term was one that referred to an act involving deceit and guile.³ It depicted the chief priests and scribes conspiring in a sly way.⁴ Later in Mark’s gospel, such falsehood and deception will be on full display at Jesus’ trial (Mark 14:56-59).

Verse 2

Despite their rage towards Jesus, the religious leaders knew they couldn’t seize the man in broad daylight. They had to be smart, or else they might cause an uproar. Mark

¹ Robertson, 379.

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 97.

³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 97.

⁴ Ferguson, 223.

explains in verse 2 — “Not during the festival,’ they said, ‘so that there won’t be a riot among the people.’” From the words of the text, it appears that Jesus’ adversaries initially wanted to kill Him and dispose of Him in private. Their original intent was to wait until the Passover was over and all the pilgrims had dispersed from Jerusalem. They would have then kidnapped Him and killed Him in a deserted place. In handling things in this way, their aim would have been to avoid a public uproar over the killing of a popular teacher. One has commented, “It was plain that Jesus had too large and powerful a following.”⁵

In the end, their clever crafting was driven by the fear of man. Jesus’ opponents had previously exhibited a similar fear (Mark 11:18). Being aware of our Lord’s popularity, they thought it difficult to do anything against Him. They saw the jubilant pandemonium (Mark 11:8) at the triumphal entry and they feared what might happen if they tried to arrest Jesus. Their concerns were valid, as the population of Jerusalem likely quadrupled during the Holy Week.⁶ Despite their man-centered scheming, the providence of God won. Jesus died by the means and methods that had been foreordained by the Lord (Galatians 4:4 and Revelation 13:8). The sovereignty of God controlled the schedule of Jesus’ death.

A lesson can be learned from the events at hand. The Lord reigns over the circumstances of our lives. The Bible teaches us, “Many plans are in a person’s heart, but the Lord’s decree will prevail” (Proverbs 19:21). Remember Joseph’s profession to those who persecuted him — “You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people” (Genesis 50:20). The Lord controls all things and His plans are good. His purposes cannot be thwarted. Scripture teaches us “that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Such truth should beckon us to trust the Lord with our lives. Remember the admonition of the Proverbs — “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; in all your ways know him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Verse 3

Verse 3 shifts the scene from the plotting of the religious leaders to an intimate gathering in the home of one of Jesus’ followers. The verse says, “While he was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured it on his head” (Mark 14:3). Matthew 26:6-15 tells of the same event from our text. Luke 7:36-50 speaks of another occasion on which Jesus was anointed. John 12:1-8 tells of the same event, but it shares different details. It tells us that Jesus’ feet were anointed as well (John 12:3). It reveals that Mary, the sister of Martha, was the one who anointed Him.

⁵ Robertson, 379.

⁶ Brooks, 220.

The practice of anointing was a common practice in the ancient world. It was a sign of honor that had the intent of preparing a person for a special occasion. Most likely, the woman in our text had Messianic motivations.⁷ The ancient kings of Judah were often anointed with aromatic oils prior to their coronations. Think of Saul (1 Samuel 10:1), David (1 Samuel 16:13), Solomon (1 Kings 1:39), and Jehu (2 Kings 9:6).⁸ Though the woman had one thing in mind, Jesus interpreted her act differently. He explained the purpose of it in Mark 14:8. He viewed the anointing as a show of honor in anticipation of His upcoming death.

The two sisters lived in Bethany (John 11:18), so it is not surprising they were with Jesus on the occasion at hand. Bethany was about two miles from Jerusalem. Earlier in Mark's account, we saw that it was in this town the Lord and His disciples had their lodgings during the Holy Week (Mark 11:1). Each day, the men travelled back and forth between the larger city and smaller town.

While in Bethany, Jesus and His entourage apparently stayed at the house of a man named "Simon the leper." The surname affixed to the man's title apparently had something to do with his past. Maybe he had been a leper whom Jesus had healed.⁹ After being restored, he likely joined the throng of Christ followers. The nickname "Simon the leper" stuck. He affectionately allowed the Church to call him by such a name because it reminded him of the great work Christ had done in his life. When Mark penned his gospel, the first-century Church in Rome was likely well acquainted with the man. Mark included Simon's name to give a personal touch to his writing.

The main point of our narrative comes into view with the mention of a "woman" who "came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume of pure nard." Made from a plant that was of India, nard (or "spikenard" as it was also called) was of great value in the ancient Near East. One has said it had the "foremost place among perfumes."¹⁰ A pound of unprocessed spikenard cost around one hundred denarii. Nard leaves could fetch anywhere from forty to seventy-five denarii, depending on how big they were.

After the woman approached Jesus with her expensive offering, "she broke the jar and poured it on his head." Alabaster was a fine-grained, translucent form of gypsum.¹¹ Because of its qualities, it was good at preserving perfumes.¹² First-century folks often crafted alabaster jars or vases for storing ointments. The vessel holding the perfume in

⁷ Brooks, 222.

⁸ Brooks, 222.

⁹ Brooks, 221.

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 98.

¹¹ Pickett, Joseph, P. ed. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition*. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 39.

¹² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 98.

our text was likely a vase with a narrow neck. The woman probably broke the top of the jar, removing the neck.¹³

In breaking the box, the woman ensured that all of the contents were evacuated.¹⁴ Her act demonstrated her sacrificial love for the Lord. A broken flask would not be able to be used any longer and she wanted to give all she had to Jesus. She didn't hold back or attempt to save any of the perfume for herself. She totally gave of herself to Him in worship.¹⁵

The woman's act stands as a lesson for us. The Lord deserves our all. We should love Him with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37-38). Nothing should compete with our affection for Him. He should be the first principle in all we do. He should occupy the first place in our lives. Jesus has called us to "seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). May our priorities and possessions, calendars and careers, friendships and future, talents and treasures all be poured out before Jesus as an offering for His glory.

The woman's sacrifice also gives us a lesson concerning generosity. We see in her actions a precedent for New Testament stewardship and grace giving. The Lord has taught us — "Give, and it will be given to you; a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over—will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Luke 6:38). Because of the lavish spiritual gifts we have received from Jesus, should we not be willing to give of our times, talents, and treasures to Him? Shouldn't our most cherished resources be at His disposal? Is giving a tenth of our income to His kingdom really a huge sacrifice when we consider what He has done for us? We have received much without charge; consequently, we should be like the woman in our text — willing to pour out our resources and lives for Jesus. Ryle has commented: "If a man once understands the sinfulness of sin, and the mercy of Christ in dying for him, he will never think anything too good or costly to give to Christ...He will fear wasting time, talents, money, affections on things of this world. He will not be afraid of wasting them on his Saviour. He will fear going into extremes about business, money, politics, or pleasure; but he will not be afraid of doing too much for Christ."¹⁶

Verse 4

As the wonderful scene of worship unfolded before them, the disciples became strangely incensed. The Word tells us, "But some were expressing indignation to one another: 'Why has this perfume been wasted?'" (Mark 14:4). The Twelve once again exhibited a complete lack of spiritual awareness. They were still out of touch regarding Jesus' ministry and mission. As they did in 6:45-52, 8:32, and 9:33-37, they demonstrated an ignorance concerning His Divine nature and His role as suffering servant.

¹³ Robertson, 380.

¹⁴ Brooks, 222.

¹⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 98.

¹⁶ Ryle, 235.

The disciples' complaint may have seemed justified by their standards. In the first century, many Jews considered expensive perfume "the most superfluous of all forms of luxury."¹⁷ Because the aromatic scent would vanish in a relatively short amount of time, it seemed foolish, and even ungodly, to spend a large sum of money on something that would not endure. They were awaiting the inauguration of Christ's earthly kingdom (Mark 10:37 and 14:47). Every bit of money would help. Resources were needed in order to vanquish the Romans. Why was the perfume wasted?

Criticism often reveals more about the criticizer than the one being criticized. Our complaints against others sometimes say more about us than they do others. As it is with most human complaints and criticisms, the disciples' words revealed the state of their hearts (Matthew 12:34). They were guilty of violating the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29). Unlike the woman who offered the fragrant offering, they did not love Jesus supremely. They were focused on their own aspirations and advancement, not God.

Don't be detoured by those who harshly criticize your devotion to Christ. Don't be discouraged when the world scoffs at your convictions. Realize such complaints have existed since the time of Jesus. True believers will be mocked at times until Christ returns. Know that complaining against Christians comes from selfish hearts. Those who mock do so because the devotion of true believers convicts them of their own sin. Don't back down from a pure-hearted love for the Lord, and don't shy away from standards and convictions that keep you close to Christ. Let not your heart be troubled, thinking your worship or Christianity may be too radical. Keep making it your aim to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37).

Verse 5

In verse 5, the complaint of the disciples is further stated: "For this perfume might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor" (Mark 14:5). In the first century "three hundred denarii" was the equivalent to a year's wages for a man.¹⁸ The first-century Roman author Pliny remarked that a finished vase of nard cost around four hundred denarii.¹⁹ It seems the disciple's estimation of the value of the perfume was nearly right on the money. Have you noticed that stingy and greedy people often have an uncanny way of keeping up without how much things cost? Their love of money and material drives them to be experts on such matters.

It is remarkable that the woman in our narrative had such a precious treasure at her disposal. It seems it was a family heirloom. Maybe it had been saved over the years as an investment savings, a sort of rainy-day fund.²⁰ By pouring the perfume over Jesus' head, the woman gave Him her best. She demonstrated that He was of greatest value in

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 98.

¹⁸ Ferguson, 224.

¹⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 380.

²⁰ Ferguson, 224.

her heart. Furthermore, she rested all her hope of future security in His hands.²¹ Her faith stood in stark contrast to the rich, young ruler mentioned earlier in Mark's gospel. Wherein that man was unwilling to let go of his riches (Mark 10:17-22), the woman in our text was willing to give up all she had in order follow Jesus.

Verse 5 ends with the following statement – “And they began to scold her.” The Twelve were rude. Not only did they complain amongst one another, they actually took it upon themselves to personally berate the woman who worshipped Jesus. The original language of the text contains a Greek verb that meant “to snort.” It depicted a passionate expression of anger and displeasure.²² The actions of the Twelve would surely be deemed misogynistic, rude, and inappropriate by modern standards. The men were out of control. Compelled by their personal greed, and their misunderstanding of Jesus' mission (Mark 8:32), they publicly shamed a woman who simply tried to worship Jesus.

Verse 6

In Mark 14:6, Jesus rebuked His disciples for their complaint. He said, “Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her? She has done a noble thing for me.” In the original language of the text, Mark used an aorist imperative verb. Such language called for the immediate cessation of an activity.²³ Jesus strongly corrected His disciples. In His mind, their behavior was uncalled for. Instead of condemning the woman, Jesus commended her. His evaluation of her service and worship stands as an important reminder for us. What we do for the Lord is seen by Him (Revelation 2:19). One day He will give an appraisal of our works on His behalf (1 Corinthians 3:13 and 2 Corinthians 5:10). We must remember we serve the Lord, not people (Colossians 3:23). A day is coming in which we will receive a reward from Him (Colossians 3:24). First Corinthians 4:5 teaches us that faithful Christian servants will receive praise from God at the end of time.

He regarded the woman's sacrifice as “a noble thing.” The original language of the text uses two words that could be translated “good work.” The wording is similar to that found in Ephesians 2:10, a verse that says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.” The woman in our text demonstrates the way in which true faith (Ephesians 2:8) should always produce a result. Good works do not earn salvation (Ephesians 2:9); however, they are an evidence of salvation. Righteous deeds are not a requirement for justification, but they are a result of it (Matthew 7:18-20 and Revelation 20:13). May we examine our lives to see if we have the proper spiritual fruit that follows those who really know Jesus. May we make it our aim to have conduct and character that give glory to Him.

Verse 7

²¹ Ferguson, 224.

²² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 98.

²³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 98.

In verse 7, Jesus further explained why the disciples shouldn't have been perturbed by the woman's actions. He said, "You always have the poor with you, and you can do what is good for them whenever you want, but you do not always have me" (Mark 14:7). Our Lord's word should not be seen as a condemnation of poor people. He only meant to convey the idea that poverty is a fact of life. The Bible elsewhere speaks of poverty in matter-of-fact terms (James 1:9). Poor people would always be around; as a result, there was no need to prohibit the woman from pouring out her spikenard on Jesus.²⁴ Even if she sold her vase for four hundred denarii, it would not be enough to cure worldwide poverty.

Verse 8

In commending the woman's sacrifice, Jesus also said, "She has done what she could; she has anointed my body in advance for burial" (Mark 13:8). The original language literally says, "what she had she did."²⁵ The Lord's words shed light on the way in which He judges Christian service. We should take note. In approximation with the grace given to her, the woman served Jesus to the best of her ability. The principle from the Parable of the Stewards is represented in Jesus' critique of her worship — "From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be expected" (Luke 12:48). The Lord isn't necessarily concerned with how much we do for Him, or how much we give to His kingdom. He is concerned that we genuinely do the best we can with what we have. Though we may all possess different degrees of wealth, intellect, talents, skills, resources, and people skills, we can all commit to consecrate such things to the Lord. We can do the best we can with what has been entrusted to us.

The Lord's words also reveal the entire purpose of the anointing in our text. In the first century, anointing was done as an act of preparation. It was also a sign of honor. Jesus regarded the woman's worshipful service as a show of honor before His pending death. Our Lord did not likely bathe between Tuesday and Friday. The spikenard probably stayed on His body until His death. The woman honored Him and prepared Him for His sacrifice. Her gesture teaches us that we ought to always honor and cherish what Christ did for us at Calvary.

Verse 9

In verse 9, Jesus made a solemn pronouncement concerning the woman's sacrificial gesture on His behalf. He said, "Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her" (Mark 14:9). Our Lord's words may not seem like that big of a deal at first glance. However, memorializing a woman in such a way would have been provocative by first-century standards. Women were often relegated to a second-rate status of insignificance in a male-dominated world.

²⁴ Brooks, 222.

²⁵ Robertson, 380.

They weren't even deemed as being trustworthy witnesses in a court of law. Mark, as he did with the women at the Resurrection scene (Mark 16:1), demonstrates that in Christ "there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female" (Galatians 3:28). The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Through Jesus, all have access to God.

The Lord's memorial of the woman in our text demonstrated that the woman's act was filled with powerful lessons for subsequent generations for Christians. The most predominant lesson perhaps centers on the surpassing worth of Jesus. Our Lord is indeed the hidden treasure or priceless pearl of Matthew's parable (Matthew 13:44-46). He is the One for whom it is worth sacrificing everything to follow.

The woman's act of worship in our text also teaches us concerning the path to true greatness. While the disciples sought to get things from God, she sought to give. She is a memorial for us that spiritual greatness comes through selflessness and service. The modern craze with self-seeking and storing up stuff does not pan out or pay off. Jesus has said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). In Mark's gospel, He previously said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be last and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

Verse 10

In some ways, verse 10 may have seemed to be disjointed from the previous narrative. It said, "Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them" (Mark 14:10). While the verse may have appeared to have been an abrupt transition for the narrative involving the worshipful woman, it actually tied together well with the story. Mark wanted to contrast the selflessness of the woman with the selfishness of the Twelve. He also intended to link Jesus' anointing at Bethany with Judas' betrayal. The story of the woman's offering was sandwiched between two narratives (Mark 14:1-2 and 10-11) concerning Jesus' betrayal for a reason. Mark wanted to reveal that the anointing was the final straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. Because Judas followed Jesus with ulterior motives, he could not stand to see the waste of a year's wages. He was the treasurer for the Twelve, and he was greedy for gain (John 12:6 and 13:29).

The entire narrative before us demonstrates the folly of following Jesus for the wrong reasons. Isn't the spirit of Judas alive and well in modern Christendom? Don't many seem to follow Jesus for self-advancement and success? The prosperity gospel did not have its origin in the twentieth century. Judas was the first proponent of the movement. He followed Jesus for power, prestige, prominence, possessions, popularity, and a paycheck. One has commented, "Judas was one of those religious people who rarely see that their interest in Christ lies more in what he can do to further their goals than in what he wants to do to change their lives."²⁶ When the traitor's plans didn't work out, he sold Jesus out. Learn a lesson from our text. Don't follow Jesus for fame, fun, and fortune. Follow Him because He is the one, true God who is worthy of your worship!

²⁶ Ferguson, 224.

Verse 11

Verse 11 told of the way in which Judas betrayed Jesus. It said, “And when they heard this, they were glad and promised to give him money. So he started looking for a good opportunity to betray him” (Mark 14:11). The language indicates that Judas began to continually seek a well-timed or convenient occasion for handing Jesus over to the authorities.²⁷ For the rest of the week, Judas kept plotting and scheming, looking for an open window of opportunity. The goal was to find an occasion in which Jesus wouldn’t be surrounded by masses of common folk who would object to His arrest. Judas knew Jesus’ customs and ordinary behaviors, so he was well-equipped to find such a time. He knew our Lord liked to escape for private prayer on a regular basis (Mark 1:35), so He would eventually use such an occasion to his benefit. Mark would later record how Judas turned Jesus over during an all-night prayer vigil in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-52).

Verse 11 reveals the main reason for Judas’ betrayal — “money.” The man was gripped by the love of material wealth. It was his main motive in life. It was the idol that occupied his heart. Matthew tells us that Judas received twenty pieces of silver for his role in the conspiracy against Jesus (Matthew 26:15). The exact amount was in accordance with Hebrew prophecy (Zechariah 11:12). Though Judas schemed against Jesus, the entire betrayal of our Lord was in the hands of Providence!

Because of money-hungriness, Judas was driven to commit one of the most vile acts in all of human history — betrayal of God’s only Son! Judas’ greed stands as a reminder that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and by craving it, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10). May we forever be on guard against “the lust of the eyes” (1 John 2:16) and may we remember that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6).

²⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 98.